

I. PERMIT CENTER

A. PROFILE

The Permit Center is located ~~at the end of a narrow corridor in the corner of in the corner of on~~ the first floor of One Texas Center and is considered part of the One-Stop-Shop. Staff assigned to the Permit Center are responsible for processing building/construction related permits and trade permits after plans have been reviewed and approved by either the Residential Plan Review staff or the Commercial Plan review staff. The types of permits issued by this group include building, electric, mechanical, plumbing, irrigation, signs, boat docks, residential retaining walls and extraterritorial jurisdiction (ETJ) service permits for electrical and plumbing only. Staff also processes a large number of minor permit requests received electronically via RightFax, internet fax software, by fax.

Staff in this section confirms that contractors performing trade work have been properly licensed by the State of Texas Board of Licensing and Regulations and they are properly registered with the City of Austin before they can be issued a permit to perform any work. The group also establishes and monitors funds deposited in escrow accounts that are available to trade contractors. This group also spends significant time with customers attempting to resolve old expired permits.

The most significant issue facing the Permit Center is the extraordinary wait times that customers must endure prior to receiving service. We generally recommend wait times do not exceed 15 minutes for 90% of the customers. The eCurrently the maximum wait times for the Permit Center to serve 90% of theits customers is 42 minutes. 2 hours and 21 minutes.

B. ORGANIZATION

The right side of the organization chart below identifies those portions assigned to the Permit Center.

Figure 65

Organization of ~~Residential Review and~~ Permit Center

Comment [PZ1]: Should this say residential review and permit center?

Comment [MM[2]: Should stay as Permit Center. Lisa Nickle

Comment [BR3]: I broke this out because the two groups had so little in common other than reporting to the same Manager, the one I'm suggesting we eliminate.

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Comment [MM[04]: Is this accurate? George Adams

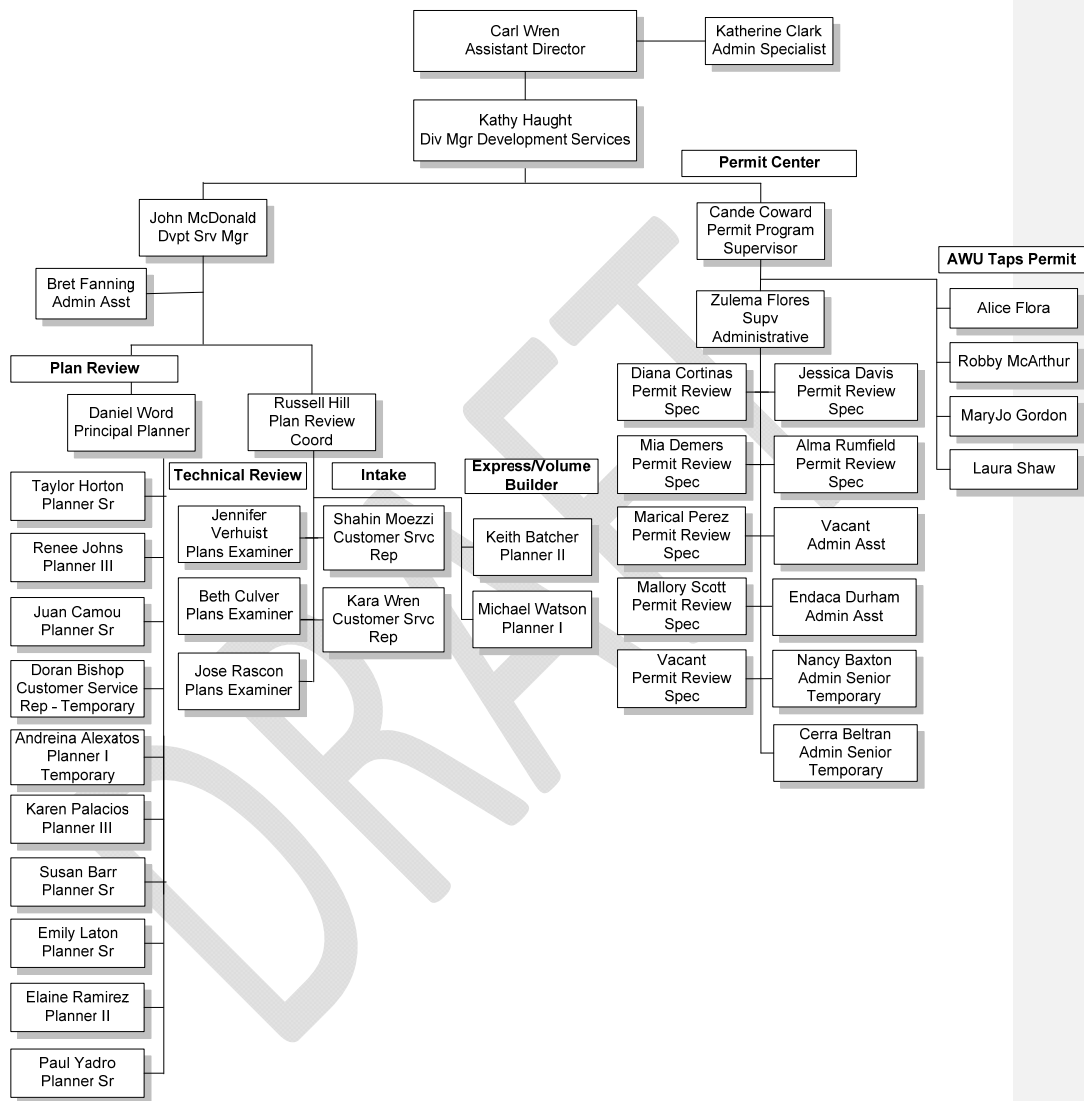
Comment [PZ5]: Same issue as elsewhere with the AWU Taps Permits?

Comment [MM[6]: Organizational chart should only reflect the permit center. Remove all other section including AWU taps. All

Comment [BR7]: AWU TAPs Permit group needs to be moved to the org chart for the DAC. Also, the names should be Randi Jenkins, Debra Gentry and Christine Santelli.

Comment [BR8]: Coward is a fairly recently appointed manager and still believes her job is to come to the counter and help staff when they backed up, which is all the time. She needs to manage! A little victim mentality going on here. Flores does the same thing helping at the counter rather than real supervision. I'll need to look closer at this. I've basically just tried to shed as much work as possible from this group.

Comment [PZ9]: Looks to me like Coward and Flores duplicate. On the other hand 11 employees plus AWU is too many for one person. Maybe you deal with this later. If not we will need a recommendation.



Staffing

Table
Staffing and Functions in Permit Center Division

Position Title	Number of Positions	Responsibilities	Reports To
Assistant Director	1	Manages Building Inspection, Commercial Building Review, Permit Center, Residential Review, and Site/Subdivision Inspections	Director
Div Mgr, Development Services	1	Manages Residential Review, Commercial Review, and Permit Center	Assistant Director
Permit Center			
Permit Program Supervisor	1	Manages Permit Center	Div Mgr, Development Services
Supv, Administrative	1	Provides first-line supervision for Permit Center Staff. Resolves AMANDA issues for plan review, permits, inspections and external customers	Permit Program Supervisor
Permit Review Spec	7	Verify scope of work on application matches AMANDA data, issue variety of permits, register trade contractors, maintain contractor escrow accounts, assists customers with expired permits	Supv, Administrative
Admin Asst	1	Front desk receptionist, sign in customers to Customer Wait program	Supv, Administrative
Admin Senior, temporary	1	Verify scope of work on plans matches AMANDA database, issue trade permits, answer customer questions (temporary position)	Supv, Administrative
Admin Associate, temporary	1	Front desk receptionist, assist walk-in customers (temporary position)	Supv, Administrative
AWU Taps Permit			
Austin Water Utility Staff	4	Issue water line tap permits and other permits related to Austin Water Utility	AWU Supervisors
TOTAL	18		

Comment [MM[10]: Move to the DAC report. Melissa.

Comment [BR11]: This group needs to be moved to the DAC chapter table.

Comment [PZ12]: Do they also wait two hours and in the same line?

Comment [BR13]: No, they actually go to the DAC center where the wait is much less.

Comment [BR14]: Yes, but I need to do a little more digging on this subject.

C. POSITIVE FINDINGS

- The Permit Center has a sophisticated software program that tracks the time each customer signs in at the Permit Center and displays that information on large

computer monitors located in the Permit Center and DAC waiting rooms. This information is also available on the Department's website.

- The Permit Center wait time software includes a feature that emails the customer when they are within the top five of the wait list. This allows customer to transact business elsewhere in the building or off-site while they are waiting for Permit Center service.
- Staff has managed to maintain a positive attitude despite working in a highly stressful environment created by excessive customer wait times.

D. ORGANIZATION ISSUES

Career ladder

We support the establishment of career ladders as a means of motivating employees to improve their qualifications while on the job so they can better serve the changing needs of the community. It is also recognized that in the process of raising the minimum requirements of an existing position it may be difficult to attract new employees who already possess a certification required for the position. By establishing a career ladder both new employees and existing employees that don't meet the certification requirement may be accommodated. Those existing employees that achieve the certification level and new employees with certification(s) should be rewarded with a pay increase appropriate for a higher classification. Establishing a Permit Review Specialist II position at a higher pay rate would recognize and motivate existing and new employees to obtain the certification and thereby demonstrate their increased qualifications in a field directly related to their current assignments.

Comment [MM[O15]: Sentence needs more background/introduction. George Adams

- 1. Recommendation: Establish a career ladder for the Permit Review Specialist job classification that rewards certification as a Permit Technician.**

Comment [WC16]: Staff is in agreement with this recommendation. Wren/Haught

Cashier Reporting

The workstation for the Cashier opens directly into the waiting area for the Permit Center on the first floor of One Texas Center. A very large percentage of the transactions processed by the Cashier are in direct response to the issuance of permits. The current organizational reporting structure identifies this position as reporting to the Accounting Manager on the fifth floor of the building. We recommend that this position report to the Manager of the adjacent Permit Center. We believe the close proximity of the Cashier to the Permit Center offers a greater opportunity for the Cashier to have access to a supervisor and combining the function with the Permit Center will create more flexibility in staffing the Cashier station during daily breaks and vacations. We acknowledge that the fiscal responsibilities of the position must be respected and that the Accounting Manager will need to retain some authority over the fiscal reporting aspects of the position, but we are confident that Permit Center staff can be adequately trained ~~to two~~

perform the basic functions of the position sufficient to cover during breaks and vacations.

2. Recommendation: The Cashier position should be reassigned to report to the Permit Center Manager.

Internal Communications

The Confidential Employee Surveys for the Permit Center Staff expressed significant frustration about the lack of communication from management and the supervisor. They frequently felt “out-of-the-loop” regarding information they felt was critical to their ability to perform their jobs. They cited frequent examples of first being advised of policy and procedure changes from their customers rather than their supervisor. While being acutely aware of the problem of excessive customer wait times, we believe there must be a balance that allows staff to participate in staff meetings so they can ~~both receive instruction and guidance from, and provide feedback to, the division manager and executive staff and to attend training classes when appropriate and provide important information that may impact their day work.~~

Comment [WC17]: While we agree that this looks like a good idea, it would not necessarily be the best move since the cashier's workload and transactions involve funds paid to several different departments and not just to PDRD's permit fees and charges. Basically departments that use AMANDA can make a payment to the cashier's office. Wren and Nickle

Comment [MM[18]:

3. Recommendation: The Permit Program Supervisor should conduct monthly staff meetings to brief and train staff on process and procedure changes that impact their work.

When procedure changes need to be implemented quickly it is important that all impacted staff be advised immediately. The manner in which staff is notified of these changes needs to be consistent and its importance clearly understood by all staff. It is not sufficient to hope that changes will be adequately communicated by word-of-mouth or through ordinary looking e-mails. These communications needed to be identified as high priority and they must be archived in a location readily accessible to all staff (~~sharepoint~~SharePoint drive). The Permit Center Manager must also develop a system to confirm that staff has received the information. If these procedure changes are communicated via e-mails then the sender can request notification when the staff member has opened the e-mail.

Comment [WC19]: Staff agrees with this recommendation but would like to stress that incorporating these meetings into the Permit Center's schedule will either require additional staff or additional hours when the Permit Center must be closed to the public. Wren

4. Recommendation: The Permit Center Manager should establish a standard method of communicating high priority information and must ~~archive~~archive that information in a readily accessible location, and confirm that each staff member has received the communication.

The supervisor for the Permit Center meets with the Division Manager only once per month. This frequency is inadequate in the face of the number and severity of the issues facing the Permit Center. These meetings need to occur more frequently and be

Comment [WC20]: Do you intend here to recommend that all staff communication require an Outlook read receipt or do you have another method of acknowledgement in mind? The recommendation could more clearly reflect the text above. Wren

supplemented by at least a monthly meeting with the manager and all of the supervisors in the **Division**.

5. **Recommendation: The Residential Review **Division** Manager needs to schedule weekly meetings with the Permit Center Supervisor to improve communications regarding issues facing the group.**

Management Leadership

When we assess management leadership we review many different indicators. One of the sources of our information is the information provided by employees on their confidential employee surveys. As mentioned elsewhere in this report, the scores employees gave their supervisors were very low were among the worst we have ever seen. The scores provided by the Permit Center staff were the lowest of all of the PDRD groups. It was clear from the Permit Center scores that staff had little faith in supervision and management's ability to recognize and resolve important issues impacting the Department's operations. Employees indicate they are perpetually operating in crisis mode and do not see their situation improving in the future because their supervisors and managers are either oblivious to the scope and nature of the problems or simply incapable of initiating any changes that would improve the situation. A prime example of the problem is the practice of the supervisor frequently assisting staff by performing their work rather than focusing on those responsibilities of the supervisor. The current practice of having customers routinely wait more than two (2) hours before receiving service demonstrates a serious lack of leadership guiding the delivery of these services.

6. **Recommendation: The Assistant Director should work with Human Resources to provide management training for the Supervisor and Manager overseeing the Permit Center Operations to help them provide enhanced leadership for their groups.**

Performance Standards

Table
Performance Measures for Permit Center

One Stop Shop	2011	2012	2013	2014*	2015
Permit Center					
FTEs	13.25	13.25	13.25	14.25	10.25
Customer wait per permit (minutes)	34	35	49	31	40
# walk in customers	26,067	28,227	33,128	33,035	35,000

Comment [WC21]: The new assistant director began scheduling a monthly meeting of all managers and supervisors when he was appointed in October. Wren

Comment [WC22]: Do you mean the Division Manager for Development Services or the Development Services Manager? Please clarify. It's not clear. Wren

Comment [WC23]: The Division Manager has already requested that the Development Services Manager (Residential Review) and the Permit Center Supervisor meet regularly. This effort appears to be going well. Wren/Haught

Comment [MM[024]: Tone is harsh. George Adams

Comment [MM[025]: Suggested change – "not aware of, or not able to improve the situation"..George Adams

Comment [MM[026]: Comments BR13 and PZ14 suggest we can add new staff at will. George Adams

Comment [MM[27]: Table appears to conflict the text above where the wait time is over 2 hours and 21 minutes. And yet the text wait time is 34 , 35 , 49... minutes? All

Comment [MM[28]: What does the asterisk mean? No definition noted.

Comment [MM[29]: Does this include or exclude temporary employees?

Comment [PZ30]: Is this accurate? How do they justify this number?

Comment [BR31]: We will see if they provide us with better numbers for 2014 and estimates for 2015 then we can change the recommendation.

Comment [BR32]: I discuss it below but it again points to management's inability to see a relationship between staffing levels and performance. I am kinda waiting for them to come back and tell us that we can't rely on this information.

Comment [PZ33]: How can they get away with this for so many years?

Comment [BR34]: I was told repeatedly that 2 hour waits have been common for 20 years. I guess if you are subjected to bad service long enough you begin to believe it is standard.

Ratio walk ins/FTEs	1,967	2,130	2,500	2,456	3,415
# permits issued	96,205	108,494	109,492	101,012	150,000
Ratio Permits/FTEs	7,260	8,188	8,264	7,860	14,634
FTEs based on benchmark comparison	Benchmark	14.9	15.1	15.4	20.7

Comment [PZ35]: Need to define.

Comment [BR36]: See previous comment. It might help if I added benchmark year. Then again, we might want to go in a different direction unless we can get better measurements.

Similar to the discussions elsewhere in this report regarding Performance Measures, the information in the table above includes historical activity levels and a projection for future activities that should be reformatted to be more useful to management decision makers. Establishing ratios that compare staffing levels to activity levels can be useful when tracked historically. This information is particularly useful when a community is recovering from a downturn in construction activity, as has occurred since the economic recession begun in 2008. Recalling the staffing levels previously provided during periods when permit activity was similar to today's levels can provide a basic guide to appropriate staffing today. A major assumption with this approach is that previous staffing levels were sufficient to meet the established performance standards and that the specific responsibilities of the positions have not expanded due to the adoption of new codes and/or other standards. Recalling statements provided during employee interviews, it appears the City has a long history of not meeting established performance standards, therefore any comparisons to previous staffing levels should be considered minimum levels that should be augmented in order to actually achieve the established performance standards.

Comment [PZ37]: But the data makes it clear they were not sufficient.

Comment [BR38]: As long as the City continues to report that they are not meeting their performance standards but fails to request resources to improve the situation, then the de facto standard becomes the current delivery level. I was trying an approach that included a caveat that just providing the same level of staffing you had during previous years of similar activity would still not be sufficient to meet their performance standards.

The data in the Performance Measures Table for the Permit Center appears inconsistent with standard management practices. The Table information implies that staffing can be reduced by 28% while the number of permits increases by 38% and customer wait times do not increase. This is an unrealistic. Management should review and revise these numbers to reflect a more realistic projection.

Comment [MM[O39]: Incomplete sentence? George Adams.

7. **Recommendation: Management should review and revise the information on the Permit Center Performance Measures Table to reflect a more realistic projection of staff's future performance.**

Comment [BR40]: This recommendation was intended to point out that their reporting that they can maintain current performance levels and still cut staff by 28% is ridiculous. I agree that we should include a recommendation that they meet our standards.

Permit Center Counter Wait Times

When we first began reviewing the Planning and Development Review Department we were struck by the number of customers that were waiting in cramped spaces both inside and outside the building. A review of the monitors in the Permit Center confirmed that the wait times for customers to receive assistance in the Permit Center were unbelievably long. In the jurisdictions we review we customarily recommend that 90% of the customers be assisted by staff within 10 to 15 minutes. The Performance Measures for

Comment [PZ41]: What does this mean? Shouldn't it just be 15 minutes 90% of the time?

the Permit Center indicate that customers are helped, on average, within 40 minutes. We took the database information for the month of August 2014 and calculated the wait times for specific services utilizing our recommended goal of serving 90% of the customers within a specified period. The Table below indicates the actual wait time required to serve 90% of the customers.

Table
Permit Center Wait & Transaction Times

(Reporting Period August 2014)

Service	Count	% of total	90% Wait Time	90% Transaction time
Permits, MEP	669	22%	2 hrs 17 min	27 minutes
Permit, Pick-Up	592	20%	2 hours 29 min	25 minutes
Express Permits	558	19%	40 minutes	12 minutes
Information/Questions	297	10%	2 hours 5 min	23 minutes
Left	294	10%	2 hours 46 min	N.A.
Cashier	47	2%	2 hours 46 min	21 minutes
All others	609	17%	Approx 2 hrs 21 min	Approx 26 minutes

It cannot be overemphasized how critical it is that these wait times be significantly reduced. Of special interest in this report is the fact that 10% (294 customers) left the Permit Center before they received service because the wait time was excessive. Under the Department's current method of calculating average transaction times, these incidents were identified as taking zero time to transact and therefore helped reduce the average time when it was calculated.

Throughout this report there are recommendations that are intended to reduce the amount of workload for the staff in this group and therefore also reduce the customer wait times. Those recommendations contained elsewhere in the report that are intended to reduce the workload of this group include:

- Allow minor permits to be issued on-line through the AMANDA system and authorize fees to be paid by credit card. This will dramatically reduce the number of customers who must come to the Permit Center to receive minor trade permits (22% of customers);
- Allow staff at Residential and Commercial Plan Review Counters to issue permits. Customers would receive fee balance printout, pay cashier downstairs and receive plans on their way out;

Comment [MM[42]: 42 minutes.

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Comment [PZ43]: Is there an issue with these or only with wait times?

Comment [MM[44]: Is this transaction time per permit?

Comment [BR45]: These transaction times are as close as we have gotten to actually tracking how long it takes to accomplish a task. By evaluating how long it takes to complete a typical transaction we can begin to identify the number of staff they need. The transaction time will not change but the wait time will decrease as more staff are added. I just don't have a formula right now that identifies that specific relationship. We might be able to total the total workload represented in minutes and compare with available staff time.

Comment [BR46]: This number may be the only data we can use to determine how long it actually takes staff to complete a specified task 90% of the time. By providing more staff to complete those tasks that take the most amount of time and occur most frequently then we can reduce the wait times.

Comment [MM[047]: This bulleted recommendation does not acknowledge current obstacles with AMANDA. George Adams

Comment [MM[48]: Not in agreement. Haught

- Through the use of on-line credit card payments, reduce or eliminate the need for staff to create and maintain trade contractor escrow accounts;
- Relocate approved plan pick-up function to Document Sales counter;
- Initiate digital plan review services to reduce the number of plans that must be routed to Plan Review staff;
- Reduce scope of projects that require expired permits to only those with known outstanding life safety violations; and
- Eliminate requirement to update master site plans.

Staffing Levels

We have used two different methods to evaluate staffing levels. The first method utilizes the information provided by the Department in the Performance Measures for Permit Center Table ____, and adds rows that identify activity per FTE (ratios) for walk in customers and total permits provides information that may be useful in determining appropriate staffing levels. In very simple terms, maintaining a relatively constant ratio of activity level (Permits) to staffing (FTEs) should yield similar levels of customer service. As activity levels change then staffing levels should also change to maintain the desired ratio. This approach assumes that the level of customer service that existed in the benchmark year was acceptable. Based on the information provided by both staff and customers it is apparent that customer service has always been less than desired by the customer, therefore any staffing level recommendation to maintain a staffing ratio should be viewed as a bare minimum necessary to achieve a service level that was still unacceptable to the public.

Utilizing the information in Table _ (Performance Measures for Permit Center) __ and selecting 2011 as the benchmark year, the proposed staffing level for 2015 should be 20.7 FTEs. This reflects a doubling of the current staffing level in order to maintain the same staffing ratio that existed in 2011 based on projected permit activity. For this method of determining appropriate future staffing to be effective it must be based on realistic projections of permit activity. Table __ (PMfPC) projects a significant increase in permits for 2015. Using this staffing ratio method is also highly dependent on accurately projecting future activity levels. Department Management should hold staff accountable for accurate projections and insist that projections be updated at least quarterly.

8. **Recommendation:** The Director should require that projected activity levels be updated quarterly and that any staffing adjustments be based on up-to-date activity level projections.

A review of the data in Table __ (PMfPC) suggests the need for as many as ten (10) additional staff based purely on using a ratio approach. However, the activity chosen for comparison purposes may not be the best indicator of overall workload. Additional

Comment [BR49]: I agree, it isn't the best indicator when taken alone. Again, they don't track how long it actually takes to complete a task so we can't compare that to their capacity at the current staffing level. I believe there are some assumptions in the recent fee study that could help us measure staff capabilities.

Comment [PZ50]: You give ratios more credibility than we should.

Comment [MM[51]: For the Permit Center? Please clarify in recommendation. Are you considering major online projects: Electronic Plan Review and where would these employees be located. Additionally, online payments will eliminate the need for customers to engage Permit Center staff.. All

workload indicators should be measured and reported so that they can be considered in a more overall approach to determining total workload.

Comment [BR52]: I added this paragraph and some additional wording to the paragraph below and deleted the recommendation for 10 additional staff.

The additional staff suggested by Table ____ (PMfPC) above and the workload measurement method assumes that these positions should be added to the Permit Center based on a continuation of the currently established assignments. This report contains many recommendations that would either reassign current duties or eliminate them due to technology advances. If assignments are redistributed to other portions of the organization then the staffing to support those operations should also be re-assigned.

An alternative to the staffing ratio approach identified above would be to analyze the total workload as compared to the available staffing. This approach relies on the ability of the Section to measure the amount of time dedicated to perform the specific tasks and compare that total volume against the available staffing. Table ____ below is based on the total volume of transactions and the time used to complete those transactions. The transaction times are based on calculating the amount of time taken to complete the specific transaction at least 90% of the time. This method produces results that are more accurate than using average transaction times. The calculated total workload was calculated by multiplying the total number of transactions per type by the time per transaction. Given that the data we were given was for one month (August 2014), the monthly total was multiplied by 12 to create a yearly total per transaction type. In the opening sections of this report is a discussion about billable hours per employee. By subtracting out factors such as sick leave and vacations and assuming staff is no more than 80% efficient, we have established an annual billable hour total of 1,322 per employee. Utilizing this method we have determined there is a need to add a minimum of 2.5 permit processing positions. This method assumes that all of the permit processing staff positions will be capable of performing all of the typical transactions staff will encounter. This process also assumes a perfect distribution of when customers will arrive at the Permit Center for service. This is obviously not a valid assumption because historically there have been peak periods of customers arriving at the counter. It is therefore appropriate to consider the recommendation of 2.5 additional permit processing staff as a minimum that will still result in extended wait times when large volumes of customers arrive at the same time.

Comment [MM[053]: Does this recommendation also account for covering the cashier's position for vacation, breaks, etc?
Melissa Martinez

Table ____
Permit Center Workload vs Staffing

Workload by transaction	90% transaction time	Total Transactions*	Workload in minutes
Permits, MEP	27 minutes	8028	216756
Permit, Pick-Up	25 minutes	7104	177600
Express Permits	12 minutes	6696	80352

Information/Questions	23 minutes	3564	81972
Left	N.A.	3528	0
Cashier	21 minutes	564	11844
All others	Approx 26 minutes	7308	190008
Total			758532

Number of Available Positions for processing	Minutes available per Position**	Total Minutes available
7	79,320	555,240
Difference between required and available		203,292
Additional staff required at 79,320 min per person		2.56

*August 2014 * 12 months

** Based on Zucker Billable hours calculation
(1,322 hrs) converted to minutes

9. **Recommendation:** The Permit Center should add a minimum of 3.0 Permit Review Specialists positions or consultants to provide sufficient capacity to handle the existing workload.

Staff Qualifications

A review of the job description for the Permit Review Specialist indicates that the employee is responsible for performing reviews of all residential applications for compliance with zoning, subdivisions, and site plan requirements along with many other construction and planning related activities. While the job description does indicate that candidates for the position must have graduated from High School and have 2 year's experience in customer service, there are no requirements for certification(s). We believe the Department would benefit if there were a certification requirement for this position. A typical certification appropriate for this type of position would be the Certified Permit Technician offered by the International Code Council (ICC). We also believe that the costs of obtaining and maintaining these certifications should be the responsibility of the City.

Comment [MM54]: Does this account for coverage in the cashier's office. Does the additional staffing also account for the technology improvements such as electronic plan review and online payments? MM

Comment [WC55]: In the text above, you indicate a conclusion that adding 2.5 FTEs would help but still result in extended wait times when large numbers of customers arrive at the same time. Here you recommend 3 additional FTEs. We agree with the need for additional staffing not only to reduce wait times but to allow for setting aside time for staff meetings and training. But we believe that during peak times, there will still be periods when somewhat longer ("extended") wait times will be unavoidable. Wren

Comment [WC56]: This work is accomplished by Residential Review staff not Permit Center staff. Wren/Haught

Comment [PZ57]: I don't understand, is this in the Permit Center or in Plan Check?

Comment [BR58]: This is similar to a Permit Technician position we would see in other jurisdictions rather than a Certified Plans Examiner.

Comment [WC59]: The assistant director and division manager are in agreement with this statement. Wren/Haught

- 10. Recommendation:** The Job Description for the Permit Review Specialist should be modified to include a requirement to possess certification as a Permit Technician from International Code Council.

Comment [WC60]: The credentialing of our staff is a high priority for the new assistant director and he, along with the division manager, are in agreement with this recommendation. Wren/Haught

E. POLICY ISSUES

Training

Throughout this report are references to the need for additional staff training. This subject is particularly relevant to the operations of the Permit Center. With the very large variety of tasks that must be performed by the staff assigned to this group and the ever changing nature of the process that must be followed, on-going training should be an integral part of the group's operations. Unfortunately, there is currently little or no time devoted to this critical function. Even though the Department has reduced the number of hours they are open to the public, this "off" time is not being used for the purpose of weekly in-house training. It is essential that an on-going in-house training program be created to help ensure staff is familiar with all of the approved processing procedures.

Comment [PZ61]:

- 11. Recommendation:** The Permit Center Manager and Supervisor must establish a weekly in-house training program that focuses on consistent application of approved permit processing procedures.

Comment [WC62]: Staff does not believe this comment is accurate. The Permit Center is open from 8:00 am until 3:00 pm, Monday through Friday. There has not been any reduction in the number of hours this office is open to the public. Haught

Turnover Rate

Mastering the various tasks required to proficiently perform the duties of a Permit Review Specialist can take a significant amount of time under ideal circumstances. Given the high stress atmosphere in the Permit Center and the lack of any formalized training program for new employees, it not hard to understand why there has been significant turnover, particularly for the receptionist position. This issue is further impacted by management's decision to fill these high turnover positions with temporary employees. Given the existing workload, there is little incentive for existing staff to take on the additional burden to train these new employees and the new temporary employees feel little allegiance to the organization as temporary employees. We feel one of the biggest mistakes municipal organizations make is the practice of placing their least qualified members of staff in a position to be the City ambassador to the public. Frequently customer's impressions of the counter reception staff formulate their opinion of the entire organization. Placing a new employee in this critical position invites the public to draw an opinion-based solely on that employees performance. ~~about the organization that all staff is either incompetent or the City simply does not believe quality customer service is important.~~

Comment [WC63]: I agree that many organizations, including municipal governments, make this mistake. Unfortunately, as I have witnessed for many years, there is often little that can be done by line managers and supervisors to acquire permanent positions or adequate training and compensation to provide incentives for qualified staff to remain in customer service positions where they have direct daily contact with customers and the public. Wren

- 12. Recommendation:** The Director should avoid the use of temporary positions to staff the highly visible Permit Center Reception Desk and assign receptionist duties to fully qualified individuals.

Comment [WC64]: Staff agrees with this comment. Haught

Comment [WC65]: Staff members are in agreement with this recommendation.

- 13. Recommendation:** The Permit Center Manager must develop a comprehensive training program for new employees and assign a qualified staff position to oversee the new employee training.

Comment [WC66]: Staff members are in agreement with this recommendation but staffing levels are not currently adequate, and are unlikely to be increased to be adequate to fully implement this recommendation. Wren

F. PROCESS ISSUES

Audit Program

There is currently no process in place to conduct routine auditing of each employees work. According to staff interviews, projects are only audited when there is a complaint by a customer or an inquiry from management. While these types of audits are a necessary part of responding to customer service complaints, they should not be the sole reason for auditing the work of employees. Routinely auditing employee's work gives the supervisor the opportunity to also acknowledge good work and to discover situations where additional individual and group training is warranted. The results of audits should also be incorporated into the employee's periodic performance evaluations to help add value to the evaluations. Including these audit results in performance evaluations can also help support the appropriateness of initiating a performance improvement plan if an employee is not meeting performance expectations.

- 14. Recommendation:** The Permit Center Supervisor should establish an employee audit program to confirm that established performance expectations are being met. The results should be incorporated into the employee's periodic performance evaluations.

Comment [WC67]: Staff is in agreement with this recommendation but staffing levels are not currently adequate, and are unlikely to be increased to be adequate to fully implement this recommendation. Wren

Escrow Accounts

Staff in the Permit Center currently maintain 996 escrow accounts for trade permit customers. Maintaining this system is extremely time consuming for staff and the monthly balance statements mailed to customers are outdated by the time the customer receives it. With the implementation of system improvements that will allow applicants for trade permits to obtain permits on-line and pay for them by using credit cards the escrow accounts program should become unnecessary. When the on-line permit program becomes available it should be the Department's policy that the existing escrow account program will be phased out.

- 15. Recommendation:** Upon implementation of the on-line permit system for trade permits the Department should immediately begin phasing out the current escrow account process.

Comment [WC68]: I think we are in agreement with this recommendation but to be clear, do you mean when there is an ability to pay on-line by credit card, or, do you mean simply eliminating the escrow process when we implement the electronic plan review and permitting processes? Wren

Comment [MM[69]: While the time frame for creating permits by faxes has at times been 3 to 4 days, the average is much less. Wren Per Kathy Haight, the max is 3 days, minimum is immediate issuance (i.e. 5 minutes) and average is about 2 days. Haight.

Permits Submitted Electronically via RightFax Faxed permits

Staff reports they receive approximately 200 trade permit applications per day via RightFax by fax. When initially implemented the performance standard to complete processing for minor permits received by fax was 24 hours. The current turnaround time for permits via RightFax by fax is 3 ½ days. This is further indication that management

Comment [MM[070]: Makes the assumption that management has full control over the budget – additional resources. George Adams

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has provided insufficient staff resources to meet the established 24-hour turnaround performance standard. The fact that so much of the City's permit application business is transacted using such old technology is indicative of how the Department has not used ~~been reluctant to embrace~~ current technology as a means of meeting customer expectations. Requiring permit customers to maintain old fax machines in order participate in the City's antiquated process is the antithesis of the image Austin seeks to portray as a center from new technologies. It is our expectation that implementation of our recommendation to implement on-line permitting and the acceptance of credit cards on-line will result in a process that allow customers seeking trade permits the ability to acquire those permits 24/7 without direct staff intervention. After the on-line permitting program has been implemented Permit Center Management should evaluate the need to reassign staff formerly performing permits by fax function.

16. Recommendation: The Permit Center Manager should evaluate the need to reassign staff from the permit by fax function once the on-line permit systems has been implemented.

Loss of documents

It was reported in numerous customer surveys that staff frequently misplaces plans and documents which causes a delay in the review process and increases the customer's cost. A tour of the office spaces on the various floors and in the Permit Center suggests that this may be a very valid complaint given all of the stacks of documents and rolls of plans that are scattered around every available space. Within the Permit Center there is very little room available to comfortably move around due to the overabundance of plans and documents. There does not seem to be a rational system in place to be able to find plans that have been sent to the Permit Center from the Commercial and Residential Plans Examiners. This situation contributes to further delays in meeting customer needs when staff cannot quickly locate the customers approved plans. It is clear that an improved system needs to be developed to be able to quickly identify plans and their location. Elsewhere in the report we have recommended that all approved plans be sent to the first-floor document storage area where they could be retrieved by the customer after they have paid the required fees. Under that scenario the large volume of plans currently stored in the Permit Center would be eliminated, however, the issue of lost plans would remain. We suggest a tracking system be developed through the use of technology, such as a bar code or plastic id strips be attached to plans that would allow staff using handheld reading devices to quickly identify the plans and their current location.

17. Recommendation: The Department needs to use technology to develop a comprehensive system to identify and track the location of all plans and documents.

Comment [WC71]: Staff has requested this type of on-line permitting but there has not been adequate IT resources to implement it. Haught

Comment [WC72]: Staff agrees that this function is not appropriate for the Permit Center staff. Haught

Comment [MM[73]: Please mention that staff is currently implementing Electronic Plan Review and should reduce the losses. Guernsey

Comment [WC74]: Staff is in agreement with this recommendation. Wren

Office Configuration

The current office configuration for the Permit Center is completely inappropriate given the volume of activity that is routinely processed through this function. Public access to the Permit Center is down a long narrow dead-end corridor that leads to a very small counter that is separated from the public by a glass wall with small holes. Adjacent to this area is a small waiting area with approximately ten chairs. It is not uncommon to see all of the waiting areas chairs occupied and the corridor filled with waiting customers. Some customers even use the adjacent Business Solutions Center as a place to wait or conduct other business. When a customers name is called, they are met at the security door and escorted to an employee's desk area. There is typically only one chair adjacent to the employee's space that is available for the customer to use. Frequently customers do not come alone, which means customers must stand in the walkway that adjoins all of the employee stations. These employee areas are typically very cramped because they also store many records and plans in those areas. The area can also become very noisy when all of the employee stations are occupied with customers. We prefer to see the process of assisting customers take place at a designated public counter where all of the needed resources are available. The employee's space then is reserved for performing back-of-the-house tasks and also provides enhanced security for the employee's and their personal belongings. It is clear that the City has not allocated sufficient space to conduct the Permit Center business in a manner that supports good customer service and provides a relatively stress free environment for employees.

Comment [WC75]: Staff does not think this statement is accurate. Customers seem to almost always come alone. Haught

Comment [WC76]: Staff is in agreement with this statement. Haught

The configuration of the entire first floor of the One Texas Center needs to be remodeled to enhance customer service and the employee's working environment. As stated in the beginning of this report, using a model similar to San Antonio, a previous Zucker System client, would highlight those aspects of a design that should be available to Austin customers. In the short term, there are a few changes that should be made to improve the customer experience. The area adjacent to the existing Permit Center is currently designated as the Business Solutions Center. While we applaud the City's efforts to promote small business by establishing this resource, we recommend this space be used to expand the existing Permit Center by either providing an expanded working counter or increase the size of the waiting room.

18. Recommendation: The existing Business Solutions Center should be relocated to make room for an expanded Permit Center counter and/or waiting room.

Policy and Procedures Manuals

The Permit Center Manager has only been in that position for approximately 1 ½ years but has been with the City of Austin for 19~~28~~ years. The previous Manager for this group was a long-time employee that had acquired a wealth of information about the various policies and procedures that should be followed to appropriately issue permits and perform the large variety of other functions assigned to the group. Unfortunately, the previous Manager did not create and maintain a Policy and Procedures Manual for staff

Comment [MM[077]: According to HR, Cande's start date with the City is January 30, 1995.

Comment [WC78]: This is not an accurate number. Haught

use and therefore a tremendous amount of institutional knowledge was lost when the Manager left the organization. When asked about the need for such a Policy and Procedures Manual, the current Manager indicated there was a great need for such a document but that she did not believe she had sufficient time or expertise to write such a document. This is an understandable response given the current workload of the group and the lack of understanding on the part of the Manager of her current duties. We believe other supervisors and managers within the organization also share this response. An organization the size of Austin's PDRD should have resources available to supervisor's and Managers to assist them in developing urgently needed policy and procedure manuals. There is at least one position identified as a Technical Writer in the organization. Positions like this or similar should be made available to supervisors and managers to assist them in creating and maintaining up-to-date Policy and Procedure Manuals.

- 19. Recommendations:** The Permit Center Manager should work with Department level staff to create and maintain a comprehensive Policy and Procedures Manual for staff use.

Comment [WC79]: This task is in the Permit Center Manager's SSPR to be done this year. It was discussed at length before the administrative supervisor position was filled. We should be in a position to move forward. Haught

DRAFT